

**Reed, Randy W.** (2014) "Secularism and Myth", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 26:2 (2014b). Published by Brill Academic Publishers (ISSN: 0943-3058). Version of record available from Brill Academic Publishers.

## Secularism and Myth

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### Abstract

The problem of secularism is amply raised by Burton Mack in his paper; it is clear that the term secular is problematic. However, in this response I would like to take a cultural turn. Using the social theory developed by Burton Mack in other writings, I will argue that the secular criticism of the Bible can be understood as a new mythology (as all criticism of the Bible are) that is a part of a growing secular wave within the United States found in a variety of cultural corners and particularly among the younger demographics. As such secular criticism— and secular movements like it— constitute one response to a particular set of social interests at this particular juncture in time.

### Keywords

myth - social theory - secularism - sociology

Burton Mack's response to the panel on Secularism at the SBL in 2011 was straightforward and challenging. My own contribution to that panel focused on the work of Mack himself as a pioneer in the study of Christian Origins from a secular perspective (Reed 2012). Yet it is not without import that Mack never uses the term secular in his own work, and indeed when we read Mack's response we see, in fact, why. For Mack the notion of the secular is a signifier without signified, which following Smith, is not an appropriate category for the academic study of religion.

Yet, as Mack seems to recognize at the end of his article there is more to the notion of secular than just the dichotomy of secular/sacred. To unpack this further I want to turn to the work of a scholar of religion whose work has some interesting application to this issue; Burton Mack. While Mack is most well-known for his contributions to the field of New Testament and Christian Origins, his latest publications have entered a new arena. Lately he has turned from the Bible to the larger field of religion as he has endeavored to construct a social theory of religion in his book *Myth and the Christian Nation* (2008).

In this response I will extend Mack's work in regards to secularist criticism. I will argue that using Mack's theory we may speak of Biblical criticism as a kind of mythology. I will then argue that what we see in the advent of secular criticism is the creation of a secular mythology. Even more helpfully, Mack argues that social interests are at the root of mythologies and I will explore what social interests may be at play in the rise of this new secular mythology at this point in history.

In *Myth* Mack talks about the construction of myth. He understands myth to be an imagined world "which prompts reflection upon aspects of actual social situations..."(77) The imagined world then is not just a collection of interesting stories, it is, more importantly, a way in which participants engage their world. The creation of a myth is a mode of intellectual work which seeks in some ways to expose something that has seemed hidden heretofore.

The motivation for the creation of myth is what Mack designates as "social interests." Social interests constitute the location in the real world that is the origin of mythology. Mythology is thus not based on spiritual insights or forms of entertainment, but really is about trying to make sense of the world in terms of its origin, its meaning or its possibilities. Again, this leads to a form of intellectual labor that culminates in a story, but it is a story in which we try to make sense of ourselves—who we are and who we want to be.

This becomes clear at the end of his follow-up book *Christian Mentalities* (2011) as Mack speculates on the importance of the election of Barack Obama. Particularly during the inauguration ceremony the mythic importance becomes clear as he notes "We were listening to the story of America transposed and rewritten" (166). And he further reflects about the failure of the Christian story which is intimately tied to the American story, suggesting instead that "we need another set of stories to take the place of the story we have been telling... Why not imagine another set of stories about the way the world might look and work if that god were not in charge?" (178); the notion then is that myth is a kind of narrative that we tell ourselves about ourselves.

But in moments of structural change these stories can change, in fact there is a kind of feedback loop in which the stories and the structures seem to have a kind of mutual impact on each other. One is reminded of Engels' notion of the "relative autonomy of the superstructure" which Althusser would pick up and use to great effect. That same sort of mutual impact is present in Mack when he notes that "Myths and rituals enable critical thinking about people's practices and situation, and ... changes in practices and situations result not only in new mythmaking and ritual performances, but also in new selections of interests of importance for new social formations"(2008:255). Myths, then, are not epiphenomenal to social reality, they are both integrally related to such reality and are a part of both the persistence and restructuring of the social world.

If then myths are stories that we tell ourselves about how the world is and who are we are in it, if they are imaginative worlds in which we engage in intellectual work inspired by social interests, might we not be justified in considering the various forms of criticism within Biblical Studies kinds of myths? And if we did use such language what would it reveal?

Let me start with a defense of the application of the term myth to criticism. Biblical scholars might initially recoil from such a designation as it seems to be loaded with theological freight, perhaps invoking Bultmann and his existential theology. Yet as we have seen when Mack uses the term myth above, it is devoid of the kind of implicit theology that Bultmann appealed to (1961). Moreover, such objections unveil a binary of science/myth. Biblical scholars have, historically, claimed to be only scientifically analyzing, not creating, myth. But when myth is understood as intellectual work which ultimately casts its object in narrative form it transcends such a sharp dichotomy.

Take for example source criticism and the two-source hypothesis which is its generally accepted conclusion (with apologies to Griesbachian and Farrer advocates). There is no doubt that two-source solution is based on intricate arguments and analyses of the text. And yet it is clearly more than that. Each semester as I teach this theory to a class of undergraduates I certainly end, and sometimes I begin with a narrative, a myth.

The myth goes something like this: Matthew and Luke both sat down to write their gospels. Before them they had two texts, the Gospel of Mark from which they got their chronological outline and the text of Q from which they got a number of sayings that they inserted as seemed appropriate. They may have had other texts or other sayings/stories that they had heard that they inserted as well. But all this they put together placing their own perspective on things as they went, changing wording here, the ending of a story there, deleting, adding, modifying all in service of expressing their own vision of Jesus.

Now without question this is a narrative. The actual facts of the matter are, of course, much messier, much more complicated. Was the Mark and/or Q, that Matthew and Luke used, the same? Probably not. Scholars often talk about Mark-Lk and Mark-Mt. Those who have studied orality consistently remind us that the oral tradition may have been not only inserted when the text was absent, but also when the text was present as well, it may often have competed with written texts ("the letter kills, but orality gives life") (Kirk 2005). These and many other contingencies belie at some level the story that source criticism tells (and have led to the other stories advocated by the Griesbach and Farrer advocates). And yet the narrative persists, it is still the story that each New Testament student can repeat and it thus functions as the story that is the result of the intellectual labor of the discipline.

When B. H. Streeter introduced the two-source theory to the English speaking world in *Gospel Origins* (1930), he is quite taken with the notion that what he is doing is like Geology. The appeal to a physical science is significant. In the time in which Streeter is writing, science has become the dominant trope of the age. Streeter's work then is an attempt to engage in a scientific approach and use it to address the source issues of the New Testament.

It is here that we return to the issue of social interests that Mack raised above. As Mack argued, mythology is not something that appears *sui generis*, rather it is a product of a certain set of concerns at a particular historical moment. In 1924, when Streeter is writing, the failure of the Christian mythology in light of the First World War was achingly clear. The way forward seemed to so many intellectuals at the time to be a move toward an approach to the world grounded in scientific progress.<sup>1</sup> Thus when Streeter presents the two- source hypothesis, the mythology that he creates is

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<sup>1</sup> This becomes clear in a 1917 collection of essays on immortality in which Streeter wrote the introduction and contributed a chapter. The book begins with an essay of philosophy and one of science both concluding that

one which brings that scientific perspective to the Biblical text itself.

As a myth then source criticism comes out of a historical moment motivated by social interests. It is not strictly a product of this moment, however, something that can be dispensed with once we see the “real” situation behind it, because the myth then functions to fold back on itself. Myth interacts with the historical moment and thus changes the way the historical moment is viewed through the implementation of the myth. The power of the myth of the two source hypothesis was to create a tradition in Biblical Studies that would produce multiple generations of scholars for whom it would be the starting point of any investigation of the New Testament. The myth then affected the history of the discipline with the historical moments contributing new ideas into the myth, reforming the myth, which then continues to have its own effects. Streeter then functions as an example of how a form of biblical criticism may be considered under the category of myth.

I should at this point perhaps address the issue of the term myth itself. Scholars may rightfully become worried that the use of this term indicates a sort of post-modern relativism in which all discourses are merely expressions of power and therefore equal. Thus the fundamentalist discourse of a god interceding into the physical world, working miracles, raising the dead, both in the past and the present, seems equal to quantum physics, evolutionary biology, and, yes, source criticism. But such is not the meaning of the term myth as either Mack has used it or as I am using it here. Not all stories are equal, either in terms of their ability to describe reality or in terms of their moral implication. The whole problem identified by Mack at the end of *Christian Mentalities* is that the stories Americans are telling themselves no longer make sense of the world in which we live. His call for a different story is also a call for a better story.

To that end let me now turn to the issue of secularism and specifically the secular study of the Bible consultation which initially gave impetus to Mack’s paper. In the service of full disclosure I should confess that I am a member of the steering committee of this consultation and was a panelist in the session where Mack read (at least part of) this paper. The consultation has since been renamed “Metabiblical Criticism” at least partially because of the problematic nature of the term “secular.” Still, the name change alone does not obviate the question of the name even as it seems a validation of the argument Mack makes in his paper.

Nonetheless, I want to move in a different direction, arguing that secularism constitutes another kind of myth, another story that we tell ourselves about ourselves and one which is motivated by the social interests of the moment. To this end, I am reticent to abandon the term secular even though I know for many of us with sociological backgrounds it evokes secularization theory which argued that increased specialization coupled with technological innovation would eventually cause a “withering of the church” and lead to an increasingly secular society. This theory, however, seems to many to have fallen under the weight of the evidence. While there may be increased secularism in parts of Europe, certainly in the U.S. as well as many other parts of the world, there are reports of an increase of Religion. I want to address this further below (the evidence is not as clear cut as critics sometimes contend), but I want to argue here that the term secularism still has mythic water to carry.

So what is the mythic content of secularism? What is the imaginative world that is evoked by the secular? Here again, I believe Mack in his paper has hit upon it. The secular is precisely an exclusionary move. It seeks to conceive a world (or at least an academic discipline) in which religious conviction

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immortality of the soul is likely. It is only then that the Biblical material is dealt with (here is where Streeter’s contribution appears). Yet even Streeter’s Biblical essay is not strictly an exercise in exegesis, rather he secures his position much more with philosophical reasoning and then interprets the text in light of that. In his work *Reality* (1926) Streeter goes even further attempting to construct a theory in which science and religion might be seen as compatible.

play no role in the analysis of religious data. It abjures the notion of religion as *sui generis* and instead sees religion as a combination of beliefs and practices that are the result of a historical and cultural moment. The secular analysis of religion then is one in which the scholar starts with the question of “why?” not “what?” The “what” question is about data collection, the “why” question is about explanation. In its quest for explanation secularism rules out non-natural answers to the question and looks instead to social, cultural, economic, political, psychological and institutional explanations.

Here again, however, the alert reader will notice that I have slipped into narrative. As I describe what is happening I paint a picture of a scholar engaged in work. Story again rears its head in such an endeavor and as soon as that happens we return to the realm of myth. Here, again, is an imaginative world which is separate from the messiness of reality.

But that is not all, for this imaginative world, this mythology is likewise motivated by social interests. And thus we come to this most interesting aspect of applying Mack’s theory, for it is at this point that we begin to look for the social interests that are a part of this new mythology of secularism.

Recent studies in the sociology of religion seem to provide a starting point. In 2008 the General Social Survey showed individuals who identified their religion as “none” at 17.7% of the population. Two years later in 2010, that number remained very close at 17.9%. Yet the larger picture was shown in the Gallup Religious Identification poll which showed that while the number of people designating themselves as “none” has remained stable for the past couple of years, the growth since 1948 had been significant. And even since the early 2000’s, the number had almost doubled. Gallup was quick to point out that “One can remain quite religious, or at least spiritual, while at the same time eschewing attachment to or identity with a formal religion or denomination” (Newport, 2010). And yet this caveat is somewhat belied by the fact that the GSS shows that more than half of the “nones” maintain they are not spiritual either.

The numbers become more provocative when age is taken into account. Of 18-29 year olds, none’s comprise more than a quarter. This is not an example of isolated data. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell address this issue in some detail in their book *Souls in Transition* (2009). Smith and Snell, working with the National Study of Youth and Religion see a similar occurrence— Christian denominations, to varying degrees in different denominations and traditions are losing young people as members. Many of these young people are becoming “nones” and not moving to other denominations. Smith and Snell show that the “Not religious” category grew by 13.1%. Almost every other category including Conservative Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, etc., all shrank rather than grew (106).

The leveling off between 2008 and 2010 of the “nones” category has given some hope that the decline of organized religion was reaching its floor. In a blog post on the Association of Religious Data Archives web site David Briggs (2012) notes that in the Faith Matters Survey between 2006-2007 the overall number of “nones” has stayed the same. However Robert Putnam who conducted the Faith Matters Survey, in a comment on this same blog post, responded that the 2011 data from the Faith Matters Survey actually rebutted such optimism. Among what he called “young none’s” there has been an escalation in identification to one-third of their population.

And indeed, in the Epilogue to the latest edition of Putnam’s *American Grace* (2012) which published the results of the 2011 Faith Matters Survey, several things stand out. First, as noted above young people are moving away from organized religion. Second, particularly politically active religious conservatism is becoming increasingly unpopular. In fact Putnam reports that the Christian Right is now the most unpopular group in the country, outpacing Muslims, Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Third, there is a clustering of religious conservatives and political conservatives which is increasingly seen as intolerant to homosexuals and immigrants which is having a negative effect on the

participation of younger people in the religious landscape.

All of this is combined with a cultural moment which has likewise started to question the place of religion within American society. The so-called “New Atheists” have argued that monotheism in general and Christianity in particular has led to far more suffering than benefit in western history. In combination with this the work of Biblical Scholars, like Bart Ehrman (2010) have brought to popular attention the often disconcerting results of Biblical Criticism. Religion in the public sphere seems to have become less sacrosanct than it has been in the past.

Combine this moment of religious uncertainty and abandonment in the public sphere with a critical analysis of the discipline of Religious Studies and Biblical Studies itself led by individuals like Russell McCutcheon (2001) and Hector Avalos (2007) and it suddenly becomes clear that the rise of a new story for the religious academy is, at some level, unsurprising.

As Mack predicted the creation of a new imaginative world is expected when motivated by social interests. We have clearly a variety of social interests engaged here. In a time when there is an increasing number of young people who are rejecting the imaginative worlds of organized religion, and popular writers questioning the motives and results of religion in general, and academics are unveiling and criticizing the extent to which a religiously oriented mythology is always-already in play in the way religion is studied, analyzed and explained, there is room for a new imaginative world— a new mythology in Religious Studies. I would contend that the secular consultation that motivated Mack’s paper is at least a step towards that new mythology.

The secularism story however is but one of several stories that have arisen in this moment. The “Emerging Church movement” with individuals like Brian McLaren (2010) and Rob Bell (2011) have likewise been intent upon creating a new story, one which jettisons the exclusive nature of Christianity that can reclaim the “nones” and address the problems of the New Atheists. The Tea Party as well with its focus on shoring up conservative religious values and injecting them into the political discourse in a forceful way also represents a re-establishment and, to some degree, a reconceptualization of the old mythology (Campbell and Putnam 2011). What Mack’s theory does not tell us is which mythology will win. Yet if we understand these all as competing mythologies motivated by social interests we can perhaps start to comprehend what is happening and see the questions we need to ask to explain them.

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